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ABSTRACT

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COMPARING PERCEIVED OUTCOMES OF DIFFERENT PLANNING ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

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The question, "Do planning techniques make a difference, and if so, to whom, and for what purpose?" was addressed by studying master planning, resource allocation, and program evaluation in several large, research-oriented universities. Observations regarding perceived utility and problems associated with these activities are discussed.

Perceived utility varied by organizational level. Master planning and resource allocation techniques were the tools of the central administrator, and were not of major use to the department chairman. Program evaluation efforts had greatest impact on the operating units reviewed and were less useful to the central administrator. The ideal cycle of goal directed planning, followed by choice of action and evaluation of outcomes, does not come to automatic closure given the usual form of these activities. The most effective activities provided alternative vantage points for viewing the organization. They organized questions, conducting analyses, and held information in ways that increased the probability that ideas and action emerged.

Expanded participation raised expectations and subsequent frustrations when limited resources provided few rewards. Communication problems became more acute. Faculty participation had inherent limits. Elements of administrative environment are critical in determining the influence of planning activities on decisions. The conscious protection of openness, participation, and communication were essential.

COMPARING PERCEIVED OUTCOMES OF DIFFERENT PLANNING ACTIVITIES

During the past two decades considerable research has been directed toward the design and development of planning and management techniques for improving the bases of decision-making in colleges and universities. Until recently little research has attempted to determine the ultimate outcomes and contributions that planning and management techniques actually make to institutional functioning and decision-making. This paper reports on one research project directed toward the general question: "Do planning techniques make a difference, and if so, to whom, and for what purpose?"[1] The effort was structured around the comparison of five institutional cases where different planning activities had been in operation for several years. All the universities studied were large, complex, and research oriented. All were relatively secure and stable, but were facing many funding stresses. The research was strictly exploratory, and concentrated on the impacts that these different planning approaches made on central administrative operations.

The general types of planning activities chosen for study were intended to parallel the ideal, rational planning and decision-making cycle of goal specification, identification of alternative actions, choice, implementation, and evaluation. The planning activities were master planning, resource allocation techniques, and program evaluation and review procedures. Specific cases were selected where these activities were attempting to deal with the entire institution. The inquiry approach did not rest upon any specific theory, but instead chose to focus on the evolution of the activity and the outcomes as perceived by central administrators, deans, and involved

faculty. The inquiry structure was based on a "facet design" outlined by Dror (1963) for the systematic study of planning as an administrative process. The five basic elements of the inquiry structure were initial conditions and expectations, basic descriptive information on each process, the roles and functions of participants in the process, perceived outcomes defined as the user's perception of the utility of the process, and the administrative environment of the institution. The primary focus was the relationship between the planning process and changed decision-making practices and/or other perceived "secondary" impacts beyond decision making.

Two themes appear frequently in the following comments on planning activities and related outcomes. First, there are major distinctions between master planning and resource allocation techniques on the one hand, and program review activities on the other that are based upon the inherent nature of the activities themselves. Second, impacts of planning are influenced by elements of the administrative environment present in each planning situation. These elements include the interrelated principles of openness, participation, communication, and centralization of university decision processes. The details of these distinctions are developed in several of the following sections that deal with a selection of contributions and impacts that users and participants felt were significant.

Presentation of Information: All of the planning activities included in the study were perceived to be worthwhile, for they provided the opportunity for systematic, structured introspection into the units and activities of the university. The most effective processes provided alternative vantage points for participants to view themselves. The planning activities had the capability of developing penetrating questions, conducting analyses, and

holding information in ways tnat increased the probability that ideas would be generated for improving the university, and they tended to precipitate intended actions sooner than would otherwise have occurred. Seldom was new information discovered, but the ability to assemble existing information in a structured manner and view it from alternative perspectives was felt to be the primary asset of all three types of the planning activities. Through the clarification of the factual bases for decisions, it was felt that reasoned and informed value judgments were more easily made.

Characteristics of Planning Activities: The analysis of each institutional situation produced the description of types of planning activity displayed in Table 1. However, no single situation exactly matched the activities as they are outlined in this table, for some combination was usually present.

In comparing the characteristics of the different planning activities, major distinctions emerged between them. Master planning and resource allocation mechanisms tended to have a very broad organizational scope, and dealt with aggregate information concerning the entire institution, much of which was largely quantitative. These activities directed themselves more to policy and managerial kinds of issues, than to operational issues. In contrast, program evaluation was primarily directed toward a single operating unit or academic program, even though the intent may have been to include every unit over the course of several years. Review activities tended to be tailored to individual situations and to collect very detailed information, much of which was qualitative information in addition to quantitative.

Master planning and resource allocation techniques also stand apart from program review activities in the nature of the users to which these activities related. Master planning and resource allocation techniques tended to be more the tools of the central administrator who had a primary concern for the entire institution. These two techniques usually had the ability to capture information with regard to the entire institution at one point in time, and they had the potential for supporting trade-off decisions with regard to the allocation of resources.

Individual program evaluation studies, however, never dealt with the entire institution at any one time, even though all units in the entire institution would normally be reviewed throughout the course of a several year cycle of program evaluations. Instead they concentrated on the details of particular units. Therefore, the impacts of program evaluation tended to occur primarily within the operating unit where a review had occurred. Program evaluation seldom raised the possibility of making a major change in institutional commitment toward a particular department area. It was viewed as more useful for supporting change toward improving the quality of academic programs and research.

Differential Utility to Users: Central administrative personnel found that master planning and resource allocation techniques contributed to systematizing budget procedures, bringing more information to bear on central policy decisions, increasing the sensitivity of decision makers to a broad, institution-wide perspective when considering decisions, and expanding the circle of participants that influenced decision processes. However, departmental personnel did not necessarily find comprehensive master plans or resource allocation mechanisms of direct assistance to the operations of the unit. A major concern at the departmental level

seemed to be the inability of a centrally oriented planning activity to promote or support change within the departmental unit.

On the other hand the program evaluation activity was of highest benefit to the unit undergoing review. A program review was normally tailored to the individual situation, needs, and problems of the unit, and provided a rare opportunity for the unit to present itself in great detail to university administration, faculty, and colleagues in the discipline. Both qualitative and quantitative data were assembled in new ways so that unit goals tended to be clarified, a better basis was developed for faculty positions, issues of concern were clarified and focused, and priorities and problem areas were more readily recognized and approached in a more rational and less emotional manner.

The Dean of a college or a director of a major university division found selected benefits from all of the activities. The centrally focused master planning and resource allocation activities provided the guidelines, boundries, and parameters within which the dean or director could manage. Depending upon the preferred management style of the dean or director, this was be viewed as both an advantage and disadvantage. The results of program evaluation supplemented a dean's knowledge of unit activities and trends in the discipline, and provided a vantage point for observing qualitative changes and shifts in priorities of the unit. One particularly useful indicator of the health and vitality of a unit came from the opportunity to observe the degree of responsiveness of a unit to the recommendations of a program review.

Ultimately, percieved utility seemed to depend upon the match between the kinds and levels of information and issues addressed by a process and the nature of issues of concern to a potential user of planning results.

In addition, perceived utility depended upon the orientation of a potential user toward basing actions upon rationally developed principles and analytical information.

Closing the Ideal Cycle: Returning to the ideal decision making cycle, a problem arises when looking for closure among the three types of planning practices studied, particularly at the level of the central administrator. Given the ways that the three activities were identified for this study, there did not seem to be an automatic means whereby the results of program evaluation linked to master planning activities. The inherently different nature of the two kinds of activities, such as the departmental focus and detailed nature of information addressed through program review as contrasted to the total organizational focus and aggregate nature of information utilized in master planning, seemed to account for this lack of closure. Depending upon the inclinations of the user, program review results could influence resource allocation decisions, but these influences came intermittently since the budget was an annual function, and program reviews cycle over many years.

The analogy, therefore, may not be so much a cycle of activities, as a spiral which does not acheive automatic closure. In order to achieve closure master planning, resource allocation, and evaluation activities must be designed so that they share a common scope of organization, a common level and type of information treated, and a common level of issues addressed. If the ideal is to assemble a set of activities in an integrated cycle, then special attention must be given to building compatible compontents of that cycle in addition to preserving the strengths and eliminating the weaknesses of individual activities.

Integration with decision-making: In all of the situations investigated the results of planning activities and the directions of related decisions had the highest level of correspondence where there was also congruence between the set of principles upon which the approach to managing the institution was based and the underlying principles and objectives of the planning activity employed. There was also a fairly close match between the needs of the decision maker, the kinds of information provided, and the level of issues addressed by the planning activity. There also seemed to be strong links between the processes and groups involved with planning functions and the processes and groups involved in corresponding decisions. Causality between decision needs, activity type, and administrative style did not seem to be a major issue, for all three elements evolved mutually. Planning processes evolved to meet specific needs and to address the particular administrative style. Perspectives of decision-makers changed to incorporate important features highlighted through the planning processes. For example, the need for increased communications and feedback to participating groups was highlighted by the planning processes. And a need for mutually understood division of roles and functions in a decision-making process was necessary for participants to become effectively involved in decision-making.

The set of principles which seemed to provide the most effective base for integrating planning with decision-making included most of the following elements:

(1) Goal directed actions,

(2) Consistency in actions across time,

(3) Use of institutional rewards,

(4) Realistic views of the future,

(5) Total organizational system perspective,

(6) Widened participation and collaboration,

(7) Expanded communication and openness,

(8) Continuous evaluation and feedback.

Participation, Communications, and Institutional Rewards: Almost all the planning activities observed incorporated wide participation as one of the principles of operation. Assembling a group representing the major constituents of an organization was relatively simple, but building a meaningful form of participation was much more difficult and required time to evolve. If meaningful participation did take place, then the following sequence of events was typical. First, the quality of arguments for resources improved, then expectations were raised for rewards based not only on the improved arguments, but simply on the expectation that a good faith effort deserved just rewards. Ironically, in the present time of financial constraint, very few hard resources were available for rewarding effective involvement in planning. Consequently, expanded participation through planning had the potential for expanding the level and the circle of frustrated constitutents. It was even possible for participants to withdraw and become apathetic toward further participation. Also, the credibility of the planning activity suffered. This loss of credibility was most pronounced at the departmental level regardless of how useful an activity was to central administration for developing plans and adjusting the allocation of scarce resources.

The nature of the potential frustration differed somewhat according to the nature of the activity. The frustration was most acute in response

to unfilled expectations raised through program reviews, for these reviews made very specific and well documented recommendations for actions that were not placed in the context of the total institution within which deans and vice presidents must act in allocating resources. Involvement in master planning and resource allocation processes generated a different kind of frustration, for constituent observers and contributors to those processes often felt that they were not able to observe the results of their effort given its scope, complexity, and the involvement of a large number of participants. Consequently, the need for effective internal communication between central administration and constituent groups was increased significantly as the level of participation and involvement expanded. Knowledge regarding the progress of recommendations, the basis upon which actions were taken, and the general influence of the participant's efforts were needed constantly.

Importance of Communications: Institutions that had planning activities fairly well integrated with decision making processes also seemed to have a heightened administrative awareness of the need for multi-channel communications. They seemed to have an appropriate and realistic expectation for the effectiveness of various channels, and they were continually working to improve these communication mechanisms. There was a recognition that routine and special documents, presentations to major university groups, and direct personal contact were necessary in order to gain awareness and possible acceptance of the existence of problems and issues that needed to be addressed. The rhetoric employed while communicating became an important factor, for in order to gain visibility and commitment for actions, planning activities were often described in terms of their total impact across the entire institution. If the importance and potential impact of planning

activities were overstated, adverse reactions were likely, and expectations and fears were raised inappropriately. For in fact, actual adjustments in the operations of a university came at the margins of the institution's activities, and most university constituents perceived minimal, and often no direct impacts.

The commitment to improving communications was often a reflection of a more fundamental attitude toward protecting institutional norms for openness and participation. In those institutional settings where these norms were highly regarded, administrative personnel consciously worked to avoid closing or reducing the lines of communication even in the face of concerns that the effort expended in preserving those links were not always worth the tangible benefits derived. Participating constituents did provide very useful ideas, if only infrequently, and administrative staff felt committed to being ready to receive and act upon those ideas.

Basis for Administrative Action: If the planning activities and the management style of the institution incorporated and protected the principles of participation, communication, and openness, then planning activities contributed to legitimizing the basis upon which academic administrators could act. Genuine openness and the sharing of knowledge developed through planning processes were means of maintaining the underlying elements of trust, confidence, and legitimacy upon which administrators were able to take action. Consequently, administrators were often able to take action on very short notice and without prior consultation if those actions were consistent with previously developed principles in which participating constituents had been involved in designing. It was through these mechanisms that the planning activities studied were most able to influence and even precipitate actions taken by university administration. In the case of program review activities,

actions were often precipitated spontaneously. Individual faculty and department chairman often adjusted operations within their control based upon the emerging conclusions of a program review even before the review process had been completed.

Evolutionary Change: However, one closing caveat is in order regarding the appropriate expectations for the degree of impact and change attributable to the planning activities noted above. This research and other recent efforts, e.g. Patton (1978), outline realistic expectations as those which assume that these activities will feed useful information into a relatively slow, evolutionary process of organizational dvelopment, that few, if any, major decisions will take place to change abruptly the directions of a university, and that a broad sense of utility is needed to assess the "success" of planning activities. All decisions contain uncertain elements. Planning products may help to reduce uncertainty and thereby facilitate decisions and actions, but planning will neither eliminate uncertainty nor make decisions.

Footnotes

[1] This work is part of a larger research project being conducted by the Office of Academic Planning and Analysis, The University of Michigan, with funds from the Carnegie Corporation, New York. A more detailed report by the author is forthcoming.

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